Knowledge Making and Writing Analytics: MLA Special Session

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The three articles in this special section all look at knowledge making, each from a different angle. Mya Poe's resonant history of the journal *Research in the Teaching of English* traces how shifting views of research methodologies were both reflected and shaped by its editors. She claims, "…journals are ideological knowledge-making enterprises, and the stances taken by their editors impact not just the content of what is published but how knowledge-making itself in a field is done." Diane Kelly-Riley's examination of two case studies based on recently published articles is motivated by a concern that "Writing analytics is at the crossroads of possibility or potential misuse, and thoughtful considerations of ways humanistic traditions of scholarship can inform it are important." Ellen Cushman sees these two articles as using a decolonial lens because each proceeds from the questions, "for what purpose is knowledge made and by whom?" These two questions raise crucial issues for writing analytics, especially at this moment when perspectives and practices are taking shape.

In her essay, Kelly-Riley discusses localism specifically, but that concept is woven through all three articles. The local necessarily operates on the human scale: it cannot reduce real people into anonymous subjects; it attends to context and individual backgrounds; it embraces multiplicity because it can. As one who grew up in a town of 1,800 and graduated from high school with 26 others, I have a long-standing belief in the power of the local. It is a power that attends to individuals, instills trust, understands reciprocity, and builds on relationships. Poe's account of the knowledge-making of editors puts the process in human terms. It evokes colleagues exploring ideas around a table or in a conference room before they decide on editorial policies and statements. It calls us to envision them drawing on both the material and intellectual

resources they have inherited or helped develop. It makes us think about colleagues reading submissions, searching for thematic threads, and debating about final decisions. The "dreams, visions, and expertise of editors and authors who seek to forward knowledge about subjects like writing and the teaching of writing," as Poe puts it, are born of local experiences. The pages of journals that land in our hands or on our screens emerge from the work of other humans who are shaped by and draw upon their local contexts. Or, as Alan Purves, whom Poe quotes, put it: "I wish I could remain in role as editor so that I could see not only the published articles but the manuscripts and comments of reviewers, which together form a drama as fascinating as a Shakespearean play."

Kelly-Riley's consideration of ways that humanistic research can enhance research in the field of writing analytics fronts the importance of the local as she argues for "a scholarly tradition with a finer-grained picture of localism." She acknowledges that "Writing assessment…navigates the tension between idiosyncratic and individualized approaches of the humanities, and the generalizable, policy-driven, policy-setting research agendas in social sciences." Given the potentially large role of writing analytics in writing assessment, this tension runs especially high when thinking about how we use analytical tools to evaluate student writing. As Shum, whom Kelly-Riley quotes, writes, "for the tools [of writing analytics] to be successful, educators and students must trust them, and the effort of learning these new tools must pay back." *Trust* is an attribute of the local, and building trust means thinking about the lived experiences of those who interact with writing analytics. For decades now, my colleague Pamela Moss, another whom Kelly-Riley quotes, has been making the point that "definitions of reliability that shape the assessments teachers and students experience" need to be confronted. When such confrontation interrogates the assumptions and values that drive writing analytics, we move closer to trust. Shum's point about the need for tools to pay back highlights the intersection between trust and reciprocity. Teachers and students can learn to trust writing analytics when they feel they receive something of value, something that makes a positive contribution to the lived experiences of teaching and learning. The humanistic perspective gives precedence to a focus on the human, the living and breathing person who can be hidden by numbers and algorithms but who becomes visible and vital in the local context. As Kelly-Riley observes, the challenge for writing analytics is twofold, to "meet high technical standards as well as attend to diverse and socially situated assessment concerns," and these concerns reside in the human, the local.

Ellen Cushman invokes the local for its capacity to decolonize what gets called knowledge, noting the ways that Poe and Kelly-Riley "expose the decolonial possibility of creating local practices of valuing knowledge and a pluriversality of literacies (Kelly-Riley) of creating approaches to writing research that are more inclusive of authors and representative of the pressing social concerns of the day (Poe, this issue)." She also commends them for offering "important models for making knowledge locally in order to consider the plurality of perspectives and practices therein." This line of thinking is especially important as the growing field of writing analytics takes shape, so it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of what the local

offers, particularly to writing assessment because, as Peggy O'Neill notes, "[w]riting assessment functions as a frame (a structure) and a framing process (an activity) because it shapes our understanding of writing"(2012, p. 442). The intersection of writing analytics and writing assessment is where our field can and should emphasize the local.

A number of scholars in writing studies have urged the importance of the local with regard to writing assessment. O'Neill, Moore, and Huot's principles for writing assessment include that the process be "site-based, locally controlled, context sensitive, rhetorically based, accessible and theoretically consistent" (2009, p. 57). These principles are grounded in the local. Bob Broad advocates for writing assessment that is "[symbiotic, smart, organic, and locally grown" (2003, p. 4), and his Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM) offers a model that exists only in the local. Chris Gallagher argues powerfully for the local but acknowledges that "despite the wealth of compelling research on and descriptions of local assessments, standardized testing continues to make inroads in higher education, and upper administrators, policymakers, and the general public continue to imagine faculty and students as targets of assessment rather than generators of it" (2011, p. 451). Focusing on the local in assessing writing can halt these inroads.

Writing analytics offers tools that can be useful in developing local programs of writing assessment. The challenge will be to use them in ways that do not perpetuate the colonialist discourses with algorithms that reinforce standard language ideologies in the name of writing assessment. Part of this challenge involves the need for greater linguistic sophistication among specialists in writing studies, both for ourselves and, more importantly, for our graduate students. Wielding the tools of writing analytics for the purposes of local assessment requires a deeper knowledge of language than many writing specialists possess. Knowing more about the processes of language standardization, the creation of usage guides, and critical language awareness more generally will prepare us to spot commercially available systems for automated writing evaluation (AWE) that reinscribe the colonialist values of white supremacy by defining writing quality in terms of "conventions."

There are a number of examples which show how writing analytics can be used at the local level to learn more about student writers and improve the instruction they receive. Several years ago, my colleagues and I wanted to learn whether our new system of an essay-based directed self-placement (DSP) was helping students to make appropriate choices about whether to enroll directly in first-year writing (FYW) or take a developmental course (DC) first (Gere, Aull, Damian-Perales Escudero, Lancaster, & Vander Lei, 2013). The prompt asked students to write an evidence-based argument based on an article we supplied. After dividing the DSP essays into two groups, those who selected FYW and those who elected DC, we examined the introductory sections of all essays where students established background, reviewed the article, and took a stand. Using corpus linguistics, we found that the FYW writers used code glosses or words that clarify or expound on information (e.g., *in other words*, *for example*) more than twice as often as DC writers; they also used more reporting verbs associated with academic argument (e.g., *argues*, *discusses*, *claims*), while DC writers used more reporting verbs associated with spoken registers (e.g., *says*, *believes*, *thinks*). FYW writers also used more contrastive connectors (e.g.,

however) and adverbs of probability (e.g., *indicates*, *suggests*). These patterns constituted an assessment which indicated that DC students were not as comfortable with the language of academic argument, which might indicate that DC was the better choice for them. In addition, by identifying features like these, we generated new resources for writing instruction on our campus since they can be revelatory to students.

Another example of using writing analytics in a local context is offered by Laura Aull's 2019 study of generality and certainty in student writing across time. Here again, writing analytics played a key role in assessing the understanding of students at the local level. A body of writing produced by seven students across their undergraduate years was analyzed using three reference corpora or corpora used for comparison—all Directed Self-Placement (DSP) essays produced by matriculating first-year students between 2009 and 2013 (a reference for the writing of incoming students; the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers [MICUSP], a reference for advanced student writing; and the Contemporary Corpus of American English [COCA], a reference for published academic writing). The overall pattern that emerged showed students decreasing their use of words that imply certainty (e.g., *clearly*, *definitely*, *without a doubt*) and increasing words that qualify (e.g., *perhaps*, *might*, *possibly*); they make fewer sweeping generalizations and moderate their claims as they move through their undergraduate years. Considered through the lens of genre, these student writers generalized more and qualified less in essay writing, as opposed to non-essay, discipline-specific writing. Assessments like these pay back because they provide resources for faculty interested in helping students develop as writers and for students themselves as they become increasingly reflective about their own writing.

Zak Lancaster (2019) took a different approach in that he did not do complicated comparisons or use multiple corpora of writing, but he also used writing analytics to understand student writing more fully. The goal in this project was to learn more about how students understand style and voice by looking carefully at the ways they talk about writing and identifying collocations of pronouns such as my/your voice and my/your (own) style. Writing analytics in the form of AntConc, a cordancer, enabled Lancaster to find all instances of these words in a large number of interviews. His analysis revealed students' complex and changing view of style and voice, and made it clear that that they expressed contradictory views about rhetorical stance and voice, "both within their talk about writing and between their talk and rhetorical performances" (p. 182). Lancaster's study enabled him to assess how student views do and do not shape their writing, as well as the multiplicity of perspectives represented by an individual student. At the same time, this assessment has the potential to provide undergraduates with opportunities to think about their own thinking.

As these three examples show, writing analytics can be used for assessment that makes significant contributions to writing instruction at the local level, it can help instructors understand more fully the ways their students understand writing, and it can broaden the meaning of assessment by moving beyond single scores to more complex representations of student learning. Writing analytics can, if used effectively, render students in human terms, cast light on individuals, and offer fine-grained representations of writing development. It can fulfill

the decolonial need to move beyond epistemic obedience to western epistemologies and embrace local practices of valuing the plurality of views and the practices that enact them.

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